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Better days

Residents create group to rejuvenate Atwater Beach

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Trash covers the bluff, the benches are unfit to be sat upon and the playground equipment has seen its best years come and go.

Near the water, swimmers are greeted by long stretches of algae and seaweed.

This is what Shorewood beachgoers have to look forward to as they venture to Atwater Beach on the village's East Side. The unattractive and unkempt piece of land at the end of Capitol and Lake drives is at the heart of an effort to reclaim the beachfront.

The plan, developed by Friends of Atwater Beach, is to have the beach regularly and systematically cleaned and to have lifeguards on duty by summer 2008. By summer 2009, the group plans to have a playground and restrooms built and a shuttle to take residents from the bluff to the beach. By summer 2010, a new pavilion and new walkways would be constructed.

"Our beach just isn't that complicated," group member Jay Urban said. "What's needed down there is a little place for refreshment, a place to go to the washroom, a place to shower off the sand and a playground for the kids; that's it. ... And clean up the water."

Memories of the beach house

Urban, along with a number of parents who send their kids to Atwater School, organized Friends of Atwater Beach.

"We all decided that this couldn't wait," he said. "So we decided to form this group and really make it a grassroots effort."

Atwater Beach was once a destination for the community, said Wendy Pribbanow, who wrote about her memories on friendsatwaterbeach.org.

"I remember the long zigzag walkway down to the beach and back. I certainly remember the beach house and its facilities where you could change your clothes, buy concessions and use restrooms right there," she wrote.

Pribbanow has lived in the village since 1957.

"When I was in junior high and high school, we would have parties on the roof of the beach house where we would dance to a musical combo," she added. "Today, I often wonder how families with young children cope with not being able to buy soda or other concessions right on the beach and having to cope with only Port-A-Potties."

The beach house was eventually demolished in 1987.

Village help not required

The catalyst for group's formation was what happened to Racine's North Beach, named by the Clean Beaches Council as a Blue Wave beach, recognition of a quality beach.

"(Racine) had a lot of similar issues," said Todd Elliott, group member. "They have regular cleanup of the algae. ... They built a very nice, very large playground for the kids that attracts a lot of families."

Elliott lived in Evanston, Ill., before moving to Shorewood. Evanston is an urban municipality that sits on the lake.

"Almost every weekend in the summer we would go to the beach," he said. "It was just something you did. So we were a little disheartened when we moved up here. We expected the same scene, and it just wasn't there."

The group has told village officials not to spend money on consultants and to let it raise the money to pay for the work.

"If we can't raise the money, then (we) don't do it," Urban said. "All we are asking the village to do is not waste money."

Getting the word out

Sandra McLellan, a scientist with the Great Lakes WATER Institute and Shorewood resident, also is a member of the group. She has taken on the role of examining the water quality at the beach.

She said she believes the Atwater Beach group and groups like it can minimize water pollution by educating politicians and community members about the causes.

"(Water quality) really has to be dealt with on many different levels, and groups are going to have a really big impact," she said. "I can come in and say what we find on the research front, and (the members of Friends of Atwater Beach) can really do something with it."

McLellan said Lake Michigan has gotten undeserved bad press recently due to stormwater dumping.

"Lake Michigan is such a huge, valuable resource," she said, adding that some people might undervalue its worth.

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At a glance

Friends of Atwater Beach 12-step plan:

- Create a nonprofit organization to finance the cleanup and rejuvenation of the beach.
- Gain assistance from communities, like Racine, and organizations that have successfully tackled this issue.
- Solicit assistance from communities and groups, such as the city of Milwaukee and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Great Lakes WATER Institute, that are trying to tackle similar issues in other areas.
- Initiate fundraising.
- Get assistance from Shorewood residents with the necessary skills to attack this problem.
- Develop relationships with other Shorewood

organizations, such as the Shorewood Men's Club

and Shorewood School District, to assist in the effort.

- Develop a summer lifeguard program with the Shorewood High School swim teams.
- Work with the village of Shorewood on current park plan.
- Approach government about potential local, state and federal financing options.
- Communicate financial benefits to gain local government and resident support.
- Complete a cost/benefit analysis - identify costs to rejuvenate the beach and keep it clean, potential revenue streams from beach passes or a coffee/café shop in a pavilion.
- Develop a Friends of Atwater Beach sponsorship program targeted at private residents and local businesses.

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